LIGHT INFANTRY SCOUTS IN THE DESERT

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During its training at the National Training Center (NTC) in October 1988, the scout platoon of the 4th Battalion, 21st Infantry, 7th Infantry Division (Light), experienced both successes and failures. As the leader of that platoon, I would like to share some of the tactical lessons we learned from working in a desert climate against an aggressive and doctrinally correct opposing force (OPFOR).

Success or failure at the NTC, like success or failure in combat, is a function of the training that is conducted before the first brush with the enemy. Fortunately, in March 1988 our battalion was given an opportunity to participate in an exercise with the U.S. Marine Corps at 29 Palms, California, and these days in the desert taught us some key lessons:

Visibility. It is exceedingly easy to underestimate distances in the desert both during the day and at night. A moonlit night in the desert is astonishingly bright and we found that even the smallest light is visible as much as ten kilometers away.

Soldiers' Loads. Soldiers should carry the absolute minimum. (This is often said but rarely done.) One way for a leader to accomplish this, if he holds his subordinates' judgment in high regard, is to allow them great latitude in what they carry. Although this is a notion that runs counter to popular thought, it will work if the leaders rigorously establish and enforce absolute minimum loads. Water, radios, and binoculars always have priority.

Basic Skills. Navigation, communication, and camouflage are vital. Soldiers must be familiar with the communications equipment and must be able to send fast, concise SALT reports (simplified SALUTE reports that our S-2 developed). Passive as well as active camouflage is important. To accomplish their mission, scouts absolutely must not move during the daylight; any movement is easy to spot in the desert.

Because of these lessons, we returned to Fort Ord with a better understanding of how to operate in such barren terrain. Over the next few months we tried to focus on how we could do things better the next time we entered that harsh climate.

During the summer before our scheduled rotation at the NTC, our scout platoon was given an opportunity to go there and augment the NTC's two OPFOR motorized scout platoons during training and to learn from these experts.

The most important thing we discovered from this partnership was that the OPFOR does not have any unfair advantages. (We had heard of the resounding success the OPFOR units regularly achieved against their guests during each rotation and were suspicious.) Their only advantages are their intimate familiarity with the terrain and the luxurious amount of time they get to deploy to the field.

Tactically, we were impressed with the OPFOR scouts' aggressiveness and with how deep they were willing to go into enemy sectors. It was not uncommon for our scouts (in conjunction with and under the guidance of the OPFOR scouts) to link up with the Army Force (ARFOR) units moving around the battlefield and follow them to the deepest points of their sector. Once there, we would mark our maps, call in the requisite reports, go to minimum manning, and then get some sleep while the ARFOR units labored through the night to stop the penetrations that had already occurred throughout their sector. As the OPFOR attack began with the rising sun, we too

would initiate our operations. We controlled artillery fires throughout the depth and width of the ARFOR's position and then moved around destroying targets of opportunity with medium antitank weapons and small arms fire.

We were quite impressed by what we saw during this training. Audacity and simplicity, with a healthy dose of good tactical sense, are the hallmarks of the OPFOR scouts, and these were lessons we all took to heart.

As October arrived, we prepared to deploy. Several days before we were to board the buses, the battalion commander assembled the scout platoon to brief us and give us a final insight into his overall concept. For the benefit of the junior members of the platoon, he also included a detailed class on the mechanics and dynamics of the entire intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) process. This gave the soldiers a sense of being a part of the larger battalion operation.

We deployed to the NTC with 20 men and two HMMWVs (high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles), which were provided when the motorcycles that the platoon is authorized by the MTOE could not be taken to the NTC because of safety considerations.

The platoon, as finally constituted, consisted of three three-man reconnaissance teams, a four-man headquarters team, and four men with the two HMMWVs. Although our goal had been to keep the reconnaissance teams at a strength of four men each, injuries prevented us from ever having a team of more than three.

EQUIPMENT

Each dismounted team, including the headquarters team, was assigned M16s, one M203, two AN/PRC-77 radios, two AN/PVS-7 night vision goggles (NVGs), one AN/PVS-4 NVG (except for the headquarters team), one AN/PAS-7 thermal sight, and one pair of binoculars. The vehicle team had mounted AN/GRC-160 radios, two M16s, two M249 machineguns (SAWs), and four AN/PVS-7s.

Given my previous comments on soldier's loads, this may seem like an extensive equipment list, but the dismounted teams actually carried little of this equipment. I required each team to carry only two AN/PVS-7s, one radio, and their binoculars. Depending on the situation, they might also carry a second radio or the thermal sight. The soldiers also carried chemical protective overgarments (MOPP suits), water, and rations. Each HMMWV had a footlocker in which the squads secured the items they chose not to carry.

(As we discovered after the first night we tried to use it, the AN/PAS-7 is generally ineffective in the desert because of the way the desert heats up and cools down so uniformly. We never again carried these sights anywhere except in the vehicles.)

We conducted a METT-T analysis (mission, enemy, terrain, troops available, and time) before each mission to determine what equipment would be carried. To meet every conceivable situation that might arise, the men would have had to carry all of their assigned equipment. But I believe a scout is accomplishing his mission if he can get to where he needs to be and can communicate with his platoon headquarters. To get the men there, fresh and oriented on their mission, I was willing to risk allowing them to go without some of the "nice to have" equipment.

After extensive discussion, we hit upon a concept of employment that served us well throughout the rotation. At the earliest moment after we received the brigade warning order, usually immediately before or after an after action review (AAR), the battalion commander, the battalion S-2, and I would huddle over the map. On the basis of his training and the available information, the S-2 would quickly template the expected enemy dispositions. Then the commander would give me his priority intelligence requirements.

In the offense, our mission was to confirm the S-2's template and to pinpoint, exactly, specific weapons, vehicles, and obstacles. Conceptually, our goal was to provide guides from the company assault positions to the objective; the three rifle companies themselves were responsible for the reconnaissance and security of their route from the line of departure to the assault position.

In the defense, we were to man forward observation posts and watch and control indirect fires on the mounted and dismounted avenues of approach.

ORDER

Armed with this information, I would return to the platoon, which would have been pre-positioned near the AAR site to shorten my travel time. The squad leaders would have completed their troop leading procedures while I was in the AAR (which generally lasted two hours) and would be ready for my warning order. Having oriented the squad leaders, I would use the next 30 to 60 minutes to prepare an operations order. Once the order was issued, we had several hours to finish our preparations and sleep before crossing the line of departure (LD).

We used the vehicles, completely blacked out, to take us to within two to five kilometers of each team's designated position. Most nights we would cross the LD between 2200 and 0300. The men were armed, ready, and combat loaded. We developed and rehearsed techniques for fighting from the vehicles. Having worked with the OPFOR scouts earlier, we were aware that virtually every night we would be passing their elements headed into our rear areas just as we were headed into theirs. We feared a mounted gun battle between blacked-out vehicles as they passed scant feet apart.

Our fears were justified one night while our two vehicles were dropping off the teams. At 0100, an OPFOR BRDM reconnaissance vehicle passed our two-vehicle convoy. All three vehicles were blacked out. A brief but intense firefight resulted, and although the MILES buzzers beeped, the evaluators did not assess any casualties. The BRDM initially gave chase, but our aggressive and pre-planned response caused it to break off the engagement.

The HMMWVs were valuable because they not only allowed

us to get to positions that would have taken us all night to reach on foot, but also allowed us to choose positions deeper in the OPFOR's rear areas than we could have if we had walked in. We found during our own operations, as we had seen in those of the OPFOR scouts, that if we got deep enough into the enemy's rear area, his security measures diminished dramatically. That is to say, this is one of the safest places to be. Once we were at our designated drop-off points, the teams walked the rest of the way in.

We had two self-imposed limitations: We had to be in position before BMNT (beginning morning nautical twilight) and in the sector at least 24 hours before the battalion entered it. Without our two dedicated vehicles, we would never have been able to accomplish what we did.

During one operation we decided to go as deep as we possibly could, partly out of daring and our growing confidence and partly because it made good tactical sense. Because of an NTC-imposed restriction, however, we could not cross the LD before 0500. That allowed us only about 90 minutes to travel 15 kilometers to our designated drop-off points before the sun came up. This was particularly dangerous; although the teams could get in under cover of darkness, the vehicles would have to get out of the area in the morning light. Fortunately, they were able to do so without incident.

Not only were we able to get in position, but when the sun came up our three reconnaissance teams found that they were spread so far and wide in the enemy's rear areas that we had several views of his entire sector. One team was on the high ground above a reserve tank company "hidden" in a series of gullies; one team was in the rocks above the OPFOR tactical operations center (TOC); and one team was in the rocks above the road the OPFOR was using for resupply. The headquarters section was high in the crags of a ridge line with a perfect, uninterrupted view of the defensive belt the OPFOR was building.

Needless to say, we were able to give our battalion a clear picture of the enemy's defensive posture, in depth, long before the battalion and the brigade crossed the LD. Our battalion S-2's template of the enemy, our effective map reconnaissances before insertion, our aggressive insertion methods, and a certain amount of luck during the insertion made the difference.

Normally, after arriving in the positions we had chosen during our map reconnaissances, we would carefully study our assigned sectors. I allowed the squad leaders great flexibility in adjusting their positions, so long as they met three criteria—clear observation of their specifically assigned sectors, a place to hide during the day, and good FM radio contact with at least one other element in the platoon. This may seem like a lot of latitude, perhaps too much. The only justification I offer is the great dedication to mission accomplishment and the sound tactical judgment of the noncommissioned officers assigned to the platoon—and the overall success we achieved.

Once in position, the scouts completed their communication checks. Then each man used some small pieces of desert

camouflage net that he carried to construct a hide position. The nets, roughly six feet square, were generally strung two to three feet above the ground. The net defined the living space for the two or three men under it for the entire time the sun was up.

We spent the rest of the day observing and sending SALT reports. If we did all the steps correctly, we would lie on our bellies for the rest of the day, binoculars glued to our eyes, watching the enemy from hidden vantage points. Although this process was often tedious, it was nonetheless rewarding.

Moving rapidly across the FEBA immediately after the conclusion of each operation did create a problem, though. We often had to do this without indirect fire support, and this is a dangerous way to live, especially for a scout who depends upon indirect fire as his primary means of firepower. On one occasion, we had to wait 12 hours for an artillery mission that we needed to destroy an OPFOR observation post.

This is a problem that is not easy to solve, but one that must be addressed. Scouts who can effectively direct fires can significantly influence (disrupt and redirect) OPFOR operations. The battalion FSO must be given an opportunity to develop a solution to this problem through his intimate knowledge of the indirect fire community's methods of operation. Regrettably, this lack of indirect fire support did not come home to us until our last mission. By the time we realized that we should have been including the FSO in our pre-mission huddle (with the battalion commander, the S-2, and me), our rotation had ended.

Another problem involved communications. We had been located, we became overconfident. During the sixth mission, after having been in position for six hours and having sent in an extensive number of reports, one squad leader entered the platoon net and excitedly called out the code word for "I am being overrun and am going off the net." Within two hours both of the other two teams also called in that code word. An hour later, the headquarters section was also overrun. Because of OPFOR radio direction finding equipment and a dedicated reaction platoon, the 4th Battalion, 21st Infantry's scout platoon had ceased to exist 12 hours before the battalion crossed the LD.

From this experience, we learned to restrict our radio transmissions. We took some specific steps, after coordinating with the men in the battalion TOC, to prevent our radio traffic from giving us away again.

First, we began changing our internal frequency every six hours and our frequency with battalion every hour. And we developed a method of answering calls by breaking squelch. For instance, breaking squelch twice meant "yes," or "WILCO." Three times meant "No," or "Say again."

We refrained from sending all but the most critical reports during daylight. This allowed us to send the messages that had accumulated through the day in one or two long transmissions just after dark. Then, after creating such a distinct and strong radio signature from our daylight location, we moved under the cover of darkness to a new location.

We also began habitually designating one squad as the alternate platoon headquarters and assigning it the equipment it needed (KY-57 speech security devices) to act as such a terminal.

sending its FM traffic. For instance, first squad would send its reports at 17 minutes past every even-numbered hour; second squad would send its messages at 43 minutes after every odd-numbered hour; and so on. Of course, the headquarters was always on the net to receive any emergency or high priority messages. Passive measures such as using directional antennas and the shortest length of antenna possible also seemed to help. Another possible method is to use two radios, if they are available, to send a message—that is, send on one frequency and receive on another.

Additionally, since half of the time when our scout elements were killed it was by "friendly fire," one more point must be made. The battalion S-2 absolutely must be aware of the exact scout locations at all times. Further, he must keep higher headquarters up to date on these locations. The S-2 can do this either through FM radio or wire communications or through a liaison officer.

Even after the information gets to the brigade headquarters, it still must get to the brigade's elements. It was brigade artillery and AH-1 helicopters that consistently seemed to fail to understand where we were. And all too often this mistake was fatal.

In summary, in addition to the lessons we learned during our training with the Marines, we learned a few other key operational methods that light scouts must grasp if they are to do well in the desert—and in combat. I offer the following advice to other scout platoon leaders:

- First, the corollary to "Never move in the daylight" is "Move every night, at least once, if not two or three times."
- Develop intricate and sophisticated methods of defeating the OPFOR's ability to find you through your radio transmissions.
- Get out early. Use vehicles or helicopters if they are available, but keep in mind how vulnerable you are in such transport; do not get lazy and try to have the vehicles take you to the exact spot where you want to be.
- Always go deep, very deep.
- Always issue good, fast warning orders.
- Make sure your men know and understand the battalion's mission. If they do, they will do a better job of seeing and reporting the critical items.
- Count on your NCOs and men to get the job done; they are probably better than you give them credit for being.
- Meet often with your fire support officer and S-2 to make sure they understand not only the way you operate but the way you think.

As a final note for anyone who is headed to the NTC, or to desert combat (or to any form of combat, for that matter). James McDonough's *The Defense of Hill 781* not only catches the essence of the NTC in an exciting and enjoyable story of combat there, but he concisely relates the lessons learned after each battle. All too often, "Lessons Learned" can be cumbersome and slow reading, but his lessons are short and clear. If I were going back to the NTC, I would copy them and keep them in my pocket. I was particularly impressed because they were almost exactly the same lessons my own battalion had to learn after arriving there.

I hope that these kernels of truth we discovered at the NTC will be valuable to other light infantry scout platoons that are preparing to train in the desert.

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